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RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 4735
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000340

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND PRIME MINISTER SAMAK DISCUSS
DEMOCRACY, BURMA, DRUGS

REF: BANGKOK 276 (BIO OF SAMAK)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Ambassador called on Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej at his residence on February 1 and welcomed the return of a democratically-elected government to Thailand. Samak explained his decision to serve concurrently as Minister of Defense and confirmed reports of his intended appointments to top Foreign Ministry positions. The Ambassador urged Samak to make constructive public statements on the political situation in Burma; Samak said he would favor "soft pressure" on Burma and unofficially advocated multilateral talks with the Burmese junta. The Ambassador said he hoped to work cooperatively with the RTG on counternarcotics, but stressed that the RTG must not return to heavy-handed Thaksin-era methods, especially extrajudicial killings. Samak said the authorities were not responsible for most Thaksin-era drug-related extrajudicial killings, but he acknowledged those deaths had caused problems for then-PM Thaksin. Samak discussed plans to expand mass transportation in the greater Bangkok area. Samak was welcoming and promised the Ambassador he stood ready to assist with any USG concerns; he also said he would be delighted to welcome President Bush to visit Thailand this year. End Summary.

CONGRATULATIONS ON ELECTIONS

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by the DCM and Poloff (notetaker), called on Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej at his residence on February 1. (Note: Samak has received royal endorsement as Prime Minister but has not yet been sworn in. End Note.) The Ambassador opened the meeting by congratulating Samak on his election as Prime Minister and welcoming the return of a democratically elected government. Samak -- who was unaccompanied at this meeting -- said he

looked forward to a return to normalcy in Thai politics and a healing of the wounds that had arisen from political divisions.

GOOD RELATIONS WITH A DIVIDED MILITARY

13. (C) Samak explained that he would concurrently hold the position of Minister of Defense. The military was currently divided, he said, and appointing a military officer as Defense Minister would inevitably exacerbate rivalries within the Army. Samak said he expected to remain on good terms with leading military officers, and he twice praised Army Commander Anupong Paojinda as "good." The Ambassador explained the USG looked forward to ending restrictions on military assistance to Thailand after Samak's inauguration; he anticipated numerous high-level visitors throughout the year, such as Pacific Commander Admiral Keating, due to arrive in late February. Samak welcomed the prospect of high-level visits and spoke gratefully of the long U.S.-Thai military relationship. Samak cited King Rama IV's offer to provide elephants to assist the North in the U.S. civil war, as well as Thailand's return in November 2007 of the former USS Landing Craft Support 102 for exhibit in a San Francisco museum.

HOPES TO WELCOME PRESIDENT BUSH

14. (C) During discussion of U.S.-Thai relations, Samak observed that, in one of his terms as Deputy Prime Minister, he had occasion to be involved in a visit from then-President Clinton. Samak said he would be delighted to welcome President Bush to Thailand this year.

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BURMA

15. (C) Samak raised USG concerns about the situation in Burma. After reviewing contemporary Burmese history, Samak praised the framework for six-party talks on North Korea, and -- stressing this was his personal view rather than an official position -- he suggested similar modalities for dealing with Burma, including the nations with meaningful ties to Burma. (He specifically cited Thailand, Singapore, Japan, China, and India.) Samak said he supported "soft pressure" that would convey to the Burmese the need "to live with the rest of the world." He suggested Thailand would make a good venue for dialogue with the Burmese. Samak noted Thailand had extensive cross-border trade with Burma and provided sanctuary to approximately one million Burmese seeking employment.

16. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that President Bush was personally concerned with the situation in Burma and would take positive note of any public statements Samak might make on the need to democracy there. The Ambassador urged Samak to speak out on Burma, saying that, as one who had helped bring a democratically-elected government into power after a military coup, Samak was well positioned to convey the importance of elections and democracy to the Burmese junta.

DRUGS

17. (C) The Ambassador noted that counternarcotics issues had been high on Samak's People's Power Party agenda. Citing widespread concerns about extrajudicial killings during the Thaksin era's "war on drugs," the Ambassador said the USG looked forward to supporting RTG efforts that would enable counternarcotics efforts within Thailand's legal framework. Samak decried the effects of illegal narcotics on Thai society and said he understood the international drug trade in Southeast Asia also had an impact on U.S. cities. Samak

praised the effectiveness of crop substitution programs, which he said made rural farmers wealthier than they would be if they grew opium.

¶8. (C) Addressing the Ambassador's concern about drug-related extrajudicial killings, Samak said that a recent investigation had shown police involvement in under 60 of the approximately 2,500 people who died during the Thaksin-era "war on drugs." (Note: A recent report by a committee appointed by outgoing PM Surayud Chulanont found that, in early 2003, 54 of 2,559 deaths relating to the "war on drugs" entailed the deaths of suspects during their arrest by police. End Note.) In those few dozen instances, Samak said, the proper thing to do was to allow the courts to handle the cases. The vast majority of drug-related killings resulted from top figures in criminal syndicates trying to eliminate others who could implicate them, Samak asserted. He acknowledged that the violence had caused problems for then-PM Thaksin, but he stressed that King Bhumibol had supported the "war on drugs," which saved many lives from the damaging effects of illegal narcotics. The Ambassador stressed that the RTG could combat the drug trade without extrajudicial killings. Indeed, EJKs would constrict or prevent our ability to cooperate on drugs and to share related intelligence, as had happened in 2003.

ECONOMY

¶9. (C) Noting that the foreign investment community would be watching closely, the Ambassador asked Samak how he planned to revitalize the Thai economy. Samak said that on economic matters, as on other issues, the Ambassador should feel free to bring concerns to his attention, and his administration would be highly responsive. Samak then spoke at length about plans to expand mass transit in the greater Bangkok area,

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through expansion of Bangkok's subway and train systems, to enable factories in the city to relocate to outer areas. Samak said he would publicize this proposal when first announcing his administration's policies.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS TEAM

¶10. (C) The Ambassador inquired about Samak's nominee for the position of Foreign Minister. Samak confirmed press reports that Noppadol Pattama, one of deposed PM Thaksin's leading lawyers, would receive the position, with former diplomat Jakrapob Penkair serving under him as Deputy FM. Samak mentioned as an aside that new rules under the 2007 Constitution prohibiting conflicts of interest made many people less interested in serving in the cabinet. Cabinet nominees had to pass vetting on 28 separate points, Samak claimed.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Although at times going off on lengthy tangents, Samak was welcoming and expressed an eagerness to work cooperatively with the USG -- "Anything you want, we'll help," he said. He clearly has his own view on the situation in Burma, however, and it is unclear whether he will adopt a helpful policy. We have noted some in Samak's party favor a revitalized counternarcotics campaign, and the Ambassador clearly conveyed that any such effort should adhere to the rule of law. End Comment.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTES

¶12. (C) Citing his experience decades ago as a student in Chicago, Samak spoke warmly of the United States, specifically praising the opportunities for both work and

study that were available in America. He said the U.S. provided an excellent example for others, and many Thais who had been exposed to the U.S. adopted American ways of thinking. He praised the American promotion of equality and harmonious relationships between diverse ethnic groups in the U.S. He showed in conversation that he closely followed the ongoing presidential primaries in the U.S. He also said he was familiar with the USG's condolence message on the occasion of the death of former Indonesian President Suharto, and he felt the USG had struck the right note by acknowledging Suharto's accomplishments and not dwelling on allegations of corruption.

JOHN